
Bali: Business as Usual

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Almost all elephant ivory carving industries have significantly declined since the international bans on ivory trading were introduced, and overall retail sales of worked ivory are estimated to have fallen by at least 75% since June, 1989. However, in Indonesia, on the island of Bali, there is a small ivory carving industry which is thriving. Although Bali is a major tourist resort, it is not the tourists who are buying the carved tusks, figurines and jewellery made there. Neither is the raw ivory coming from recently-poached elephants.

Historically, Bali has been a place of refuge for artists, intellectuals and nobles from Java. It is one of the parts of the Indonesian archipelago that is non-Islamic, and Bali's Hindu religious practices are much less strict than in India. The society is communal and based on agriculture. Because the land is very fertile, life is not hard; even now, despite the crowded population of more than 2.6 million people, there is time to spare to do everyday tasks artistically. Balinese art seems to be a natural pursuit, whether it is the simple arrangement of offerings set out for Hindu

gods or decorating with sculpture the entrance to one's house.

Bali's art museum in the capital, Denpasar, consists of a group of buildings reminiscent of traditional temple and palace architecture. Inside, there are paintings, sculptures and many more commonplace items, such as baskets — even these show an artistic flair. Among the ivory treasures are handles for kris knives, sculptures of gods and goddesses, intricately designed fans and one particularly large carved ball. None is marked with a date or the artist's name, but most could have been made 50 or a 100 years ago on Bali.

Until droves of western tourists began flooding the island, there was not much trade in Balinese arts and crafts, but soon shops sprang up, selling all kinds. When we first went to Bali, in January, 1981, we wanted to find out if there was an ivory industry. We were directed to a village north of Denpasar and within walking distance of the town



Elephant ivory carving in Indonesia is only carried out in any quantity on the island of Bali.
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The Bali ivory carvers specialize in carving large old tusks which originate from elephants from India and Sumatra and were brought to the island of Flores east of Bali as a form of currency many years ago.

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of Ubud. It was Tampaksiring, and there we watched craftsmen copying Japanese netsukes and German animal figurines from photographs and drawings. When carving these small items, they usually sat out on verandahs, the piece of ivory they were working held by their toes against a block of wood. Their hand tools were numerous; practically every one had 12 or more chisels. We learned that there were around 25 ivory carvers in the village, some working at their own homes, others coming to the houses of the three ivory businesses, which were all cottage industries.

Most of the carvers had learned how to carve on cow horn before embarking on ivory. Being paid for the work they produced, rather than regular wages, they earned around 75,000 rupiah a month (then the equivalent of \$120), which favourably compared with the lowest monthly minimum salary of \$32 in Bali.

They were not making a great variety of items, and when copying pictures of netsukes and animal figurines, the craftsmen rarely modified any of the designs. Jewellery was mostly limited to bangle-type bracelets with silver clasps. However, when the craftsmen were given whole tusks to carve, their work was spectacular and imaginative. Often they depicted Balinese versions of Hindu mythology on them. They also paid much attention to detail, such as showing the folds on a goddess' gown rippled by a breeze. Some of the tusks being carved weighed 15 kg or more, very large for Asian ivory.

Finished pieces were usually placed in display cabinets inside the proprietor's parlour, where sales to tourists were carried out. In one, we saw a very ornately carved small tusk priced at \$400. It weighed about a kilo, but we were told that the tusk had been

1.5 kg raw. Narrow bracelets with the silver clasps cost \$33 retail.

We heard complaints about raw ivory becoming expensive; the owner of Kenaka Centre of Ivory Carving told us that he paid \$130 per kg for small tusks and \$160 for large ones. We were surprised to learn that all the ivory used for carving in Bali came from the island of Flores, some 500 km away. Flores probably never has had any elephants at all.

When we made our plans to return to Bali in December, 1990, we contacted a friend of ours, Kalman Muller whom we first met when we were students together at the University of Arizona in the 1960s. Since then, Dr Muller has spent much of his life in Southeast Asia, writing anthropological articles and books about the people and photographing them. One of his specialties is the customs of Indonesians. He explained to us that before Europeans went to the archipelago, Bugis traders, originally from Sulawesi, established entrepôts all over Indonesia. Among the items they brought to Flores were porcelain, gold and elephant tusks. The latter were used by the people of Flores as money. The Bugis obtained the ivory mostly from Sumatran elephants, but some probably originated in other Southeast Asian countries and India. Dr Muller knows a descendent of a Flores rajah who owns a good number of large tusks given to the family generations ago by a Portuguese. On Flores, a bride price is sometimes still paid in raw ivory, but this tradition is fading with the demand for cash. Local Chinese merchants are known to buy up old ivory stocks and the Tampaksiring businessmen from Bali barter with them or the families who remain with some of the old 'money'.

Competition for the ivory has increased the price. In 1986 tusks from Flores cost \$167 per kg; by 1990 \$265. Although the rise from 1981 to 1986 is little in dollars, in rupiah it is much greater, due to devaluation. By 1990, the official exchange was 1,880 rupiah to the dollar, compared to 620 in 1981. On our recent visit to Tampaksiring, we found that the ivory business owners were continuing to buy all their stocks from Flores. They said they never used African ivory because they believed its softness rendered it inferior. We looked at most of the tusks in the three ivory carving establishments and saw that they were all from the Asian species and quite old, with deep dark brown stains. Many were large, weighing between 20 and 30 kg. The proprietor of an ivory business proudly

showed us a 40 kg tusk, which in halting English was described as "gigantic".

Indeed, that is huge for an Asian elephant. There were 24 other tusks in a storeroom at the house. Although we were unable to estimate how much ivory is presently being carved in Bali, we had the impression that it is considerably more than the amount we calculated in 1980, at which time the largest business used 120 kg a year.

We noticed two important changes in the Tampaksiring ivory industry, both of which may account for the higher ivory consumption. While the carvers are still only about 25 in number, they now use electric tools to speed up their rough work, dentist drills having been purchased for them by the business owners in late 1989. Power lines only reached the town of Ubud in the mid-1970s, and the craftsmen are a little wary of electricity; several said that they prefer using their old hand tools. None the less, they are being encouraged to change their ways, as the proprietors realise that the quicker the work is done, the sooner they can make a return on their ivory investments. We noticed that the craftsmen worked more steadily than they formerly did. Gone were the long afternoon card-playing games; they kept working from 8 o'clock in the morning until around 4 o'clock, with breaks only for food and drink. Payment received was still for output, and the craftsmen in 1990 were earning on average \$110 a month, compared to \$40 for a shopgirl's salary. All the craftsmen we watched were carving large tusks. It may take as long as two years for a 24 kg tusk to be completed. One or two craftsmen may work on it. Reduced to about 18 kg when finished, it will have cost the proprietor just over \$10,000, of which \$7,000 would have been paid for the raw ivory, \$2,500 for the labour and \$560 for food, electricity, maintenance of the tools used, etc. For such a tusk, the proprietor would ask \$18,600.

There is a new market for the ivory carvings of Bali, and that is the major change that has taken place. Having started business by selling ivory bric-à-brac and jewellery to foreign tourists in the 1960s, then specializing in figurines and netsukes for Germans and Japanese in the 1970s, one woman proprietor began producing whole carved tusks for wealthy Indonesian officials in Jakarta in the 1980s. Today, they are her main clientele, and she is delighted that she began cultivating their interest in fine ivory pieces when she

did. As a result, her business did not suffer in the least when tourists began avoiding ivory purchases.

When we visited her showroom, admiring several exquisite carvings, she assumed we were ivory collectors but warned us against buying anything because of the illegality of moving ivory from one country to another. We asked her if she ever sold items to tourists now, and later in the course of conversation, she admitted that she did. She pointed out a few carvings on ivory plates, 15 cm long and 6cm high, but quite thin. Those, she said, Japanese and Taiwanese do occasionally buy and smuggle out. Each one was exquisite, depicting animals in their natural habitat, such as otters in water, bear cubs playing in a forest and mice in a field.

As for the whole carved tusks, she herself takes them to Java to show prospective buyers. Occasionally, senior government officials come to Bali to choose ivory pieces; however, most sales are made in Jakarta by all three of the ivory businesses. Interestingly, the buyers rarely commission orders, they prefer seeing finished work and making their choices then.

What has happened to the ivory industry in Bali could occur in other countries with stocks of raw ivory. Conservationists who are actively attempting to close down all trade in ivory would then need to re-direct their efforts to prevent the emergence of local markets for ivory carvings among the elite.

| Commodity | | Price in US\$ |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|
| Cigarette holder | 11 cm | 34 |
| Bracelet (small, partly carved) | 1.25 cm thick | 66 |
| Buddha figure | 5 cm tall | 93 |
| Mouse sculpture | 5 cm long | 160 |
| Masked Dancers sculpture | 5 cm tall | 250 |
| Ghanesh sculpture | 9 cm tall | 700 |
| Komodo dragon sculpture | 20 cm tall | 1 ,000 |
| Carved tusk | 1.25 kg | 1,064 |
| Hindu god | 19 cm tall | 1,200 |
| Carved tusk | 5kg | 3,190 |
| Carved tusk | 18 kg | 18,600 |
| Source: Survey taken by the authors | | |